

The Clipper Visits... Rocco Longo

By MARTHA HIMES

He likes Springsteen, but his dad likes Sinatra. Raised in a stereotypical Italian family in New Jersey, Town Manager Rocco Longo's lifelong love of politics has carried him from the local asbestos factory to Duxbury Town Hall, with pit stops in West Virginia, Northborough and Pittsburgh along the way.



Longo discovered he liked politics as a child when he campaigned for mayoral candidates in return for ice-cream sundaes. He honed his consensus-building, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills in childhood pickup games.

"When we were kids, we'd walk around a couple blocks, and all of a sudden there'd be eighteen kids, and we'd play

baseball. There weren't parents around. We'd argue and fight, and play the game, and somehow, all our problems, whether you're safe or you're out... we as kids solved the problems ourselves," he said.

For 44 years, Longo's father worked in the Johns-Manville asbestos factory, producing asbestos shingles and floor tiles. After high school, his father gave him two choices: work in the asbestos factory, or go to college. Longo ended up doing both. For four summers, he worked in the factory, making door treads. The rest of the year, he attended Salem College in West Virginia.

"My father was almost like a guidance counselor at Johns-Manville. He knew it was a very tough job, he knew the people I'd be working with, and I was the college hippie, so they'd play practical jokes on me. Every time I'd see my father, I knew I was up for trouble," Longo said.

The work convinced the "college hippie" to study. In 1973, he became the first person in his family to graduate from college, having earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science. He continued his studies at West Virginia

University's graduate program in Public Administration.

Longo began his career in West Virginia, first working as the Wood County Development Director and next as the city of Parkersburg's Housing Director.

But he aspired to city management. In 1981, Longo took a \$8,000 pay cut to become the first-ever City Manager of Wellsburg, WV. Despite the pay cut, his \$18,000 salary was a sore point to the town. Throughout his tenure there, two City Councilmen wanted to fire him and use his salary to repair the roads. "It was such a depressed place. It was a very poor steel mill community. But we got a half a million dollar community development block grant, and that turned the whole community around," Longo said.

In 1994, Longo applied to Chatham, Kingston, Duxbury and a town in New Hampshire. "I knew nothing about Duxbury. But the first time I drove out here, I thought, 'this place is awesome.'"

He and his wife, Colleen, were curious about New England, so in 1984 he accepted a job as Town Manager of Northborough, MA. They both immediately loved New England and its people. "In West Virginia, everybody's your friend. There's some truth to the whole issue of southern hospitality. But I think in New England, the friendships that you make have more depth, becoming almost an extended family," Longo said.

While in Northborough, the Longo family grew, with the birth of Parker Joseph in 1989. Another son, Tyler Christian,

followed shortly after in 1992.

The new family wanted to move closer to Colleen's hometown, Pittsburgh. And Longo was curious to see if his public administration skills would transfer to the private sector. In 1991 he became CEO of Transitional Services, Inc., a mental health and mental retardation housing provider.

Longo discovered his skills were transferable, but he found the private sector frustrating. "I understand politics in the community. That's what I've been studying all my life.... But the competitive politics to survive as an organization, that's very different," he said.

He missed town management, and both he and Colleen missed New England. In 1994, Longo applied to Chatham, Kingston, Duxbury and a town in New Hampshire. "I knew nothing about Duxbury. But the first time I drove out here, I thought, 'this place is awesome!'" Longo remembered.

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He started his new job in April of 1994. "It's been a great experience and I'm really lucky to work here. I don't want to go anywhere else," he said.

Working in Duxbury has broadened Longo's horizons as well. In West Virginia, poverty was the major concern. Here, he's learned a lot about environmental issues and would like to see a Bayside Area Management Plan written soon. He feels creating affordable housing is one of Duxbury's biggest challenges. Other concerns include supporting the schools through the state's ongoing fiscal crisis and balancing the myriad needs of the community.

Longo is also working to find new Planning and DPW heads. He and the search committees recently began scheduling semi-finalist interviews for the positions.

In his spare time, Longo coaches Parker Joseph's baseball team and Tyler Christian's soccer team, and is active in St. John's Episcopal Church. The Longos have hosted two exchange students, one from Italy and one from France. On a professional level, he is involved with the International City Management Association, an organization dealing with international relations.

The pressures of town management, volunteer work and family present Longo with personal challenges. Someday soon, he'd like to initiate a Family Night in Duxbury, as recently created in Ridgewood, NJ: a night when there are no scheduled community activities so that families can spend the evening together.

"When I was growing up, my father went to work in the morning, he came home, took a nap, we ate dinner at 4:30, we talked, we watched TV, we

went to bed.... I thought that was the way everybody lived. But that's not the way everybody lives. The world is so different today," Longo said. "We have to get back to some very basic family things."

Longo enjoys taking his sons back to New Jersey to visit their grandparents. One recent visit coincided with his mother's 80th birthday celebration. "I love to go to visit my family.... We do the things I

did when I was a kid. I'm trying to show my kids where I went to school, where I played baseball, the kinds of things that I did," he said. One thing he can't show them is the asbestos factory. The company went bankrupt, and there's a Wal-Mart on the site now.

"I like going back home, but I'd never want to move. If I had my druthers, I'd like to stay here as long as I could," Longo said.